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Montana

Fish & Wildlife Commission

Location: FWP Headquarters
Helena Headquarters
1420 East 6th Avenue
Helena, Montana

Date: July 25, 2019
Time: 10:00 a.m.

Agenda Items:

1. Call to Order
2. Willow Creek Reservoir Removal of Fishing Restrictions
3. Adjournment

Willow Creek Reservoir Removal of Fishing Restrictions (R4)

Background: Willow Creek Reservoir is a 1,300-acre irrigation storage reservoir near Augusta that sustains popular rainbow trout and tiger muskie fisheries that are supplemented by stocking. FWP was notified by the Bureau of Reclamation and Greenfields Irrigation District that the reservoir must be drained to perform maintenance on dam infrastructure. Water levels are expected to be drawn down below levels that can sustain aquatic life. FWP is proposing to lift all fishing restrictions on Willow Creek Reservoir to provide the public the opportunity to harvest and consume fish that are not expected to survive the drawdown. Drawdown of the reservoir is underway, and the reservoir is expected to be fully drained by late August.

Public Involvement Process & Results: There has been no public scoping or opportunity to comment on this proposal. Due to time constraints the Department feels that immediate lifting of fishing restrictions is appropriate.

Alternatives and Analysis: The department discussed alternatives with the Bureau of Reclamation and the irrigation district to avoid full drawdown of the reservoir, but timing and cost constraints precluded moving forward with other alternatives.

Chairman Colton asked Mr. Roberts to begin the presentation.

Eric Roberts, Fisheries Management Bureau Chief, stated this is about the Willow Creek removal of fishing restrictions. Willow Creek is a 1,300-acre irrigation storage reservoir near Augusta that sustains a popular rainbow trout and tiger muskie fishery that is supplemented by stocking. Willow Creek is a popular fishery with approximately 700 angler days in 2017 and estimated economic value of 1.1 million dollars for fishing activities. FWP was very recently notified by the Bureau of Reclamation and Greenfields Irrigation District that the reservoir must be drawn down to perform maintenance on the dam outlet structure. Water levels are suspected to be drawn down to support aquatic life. FWP is proposing to lift restrictions to support unlimited fishing on Willow Creek Reservoir to provide the public to harvest and consume fish that is not expected to survive the drawdown.

Drawdown of the reservoir is underway and the is expected to be fully drained by the end of August. The Department discussed alternatives with the Bureau of Reclamation and the irrigation district to avoid full drawdown of the reservoir. Timing restraints concluded moving forward with other alternatives. This action removes all daily bag limits, possession limits, and gear limits for Willow Creek Reservoir. We are asking that the Commission to lift all fishing restrictions on Willow Creek Reservoir during the drawdown and keep those in place until December 31, 2019. Eileen Ryce and Jason Rhoten are also available for questions.

Chairman Colton asked Ms. Ryce if she would share some of the discussions that FWP has had with the Bureau of Reclamation and the Greenfields Irrigation district.

Eileen Ryce, Fisheries Administrator stated that is only very recent that they have become aware of this situation. Our first sit down meeting with the Bureau of Reclamation and the irrigation district was Thursday of last week. Since then we have been trying to negotiate with them for a way to be able to maintain enough water to sustain aquatic life and allowing the irrigation district to do the necessary repairs. Last night she was in negotiations with the irrigation district. We did have an agreement to minimize that drawdown to maintain a level to allow aquatic life to be sustained and allow us the opportunity for us to look at other alternatives including the installation of a cofferdam.

Unfortunately, early this morning Ms. Ryce received a call from the irrigation district indicating that they plan to draw the reservoir down and increase the level in which they are drawing down to make that happen quickly. This is so they can get repairs done very soon. It is her understanding concerning the conversation this morning is the reservoir will be drained to the bottom and there is no other options available to help maintain aquatic life.

We do have an agreement with the Bureau of Reclamation to look at options for mitigation after the drawdown occurs. We are hoping that we can take the fishery back to where it once was, but that will take several years. We are expecting that even with mitigation from the Bureau of Reclamation it could take as long as four years to get the fishery back to similar levels that it is now. Our recommendation to you is to move ahead as Mr. Roberts mentioned, to lift the restrictions to allow the public the opportunity to fish for as many fish as they can before the water level reaches the bottom of the reservoir.

Chairman Colton asked if that was 40 or four years.

Ms. Ryce answered that it was four years.

Chairman Colton stated that was still troubling. Obviously, this is very disappointing. Is there any comment or questions from the Commission?

Vice Chairman Stuker asked if we were going to be changing regulations moving forward? Would it start this fall moving forward to five years until we see what the recovery period is?

Ms. Ryce stated that right now they are looking at keeping a few no fishing regulations in place. This will be until we know what the situation will be. Right now, it is really unclear as to when the reservoir will be refilled. The irrigation district told her this morning that they hoping to refill it quickly. That will depend on if they can get the repairs done quickly. Until we have a better idea of how this is going to work, we can't really tell you right now is beyond the fishing regulation recommendations.

Chairman Colton asked if there were any other questions.

Motion: Vice Chairman Colton moved, and Commissioner Brower seconded the Fish and Wildlife Commission lift all fishing restrictions on Willow Creek Reservoir until December 31, 2019.

Vice Chairman Stuker wanted to commend the Fisheries staff for trying to get the negotiations going and through no fault of theirs they did not. He appreciates the efforts to keep this open as a fishery.

Chairman Colton wanted to echo the thanks for the late-night efforts. He has tried to negotiate with the Bureau of Reclamation in the past. This is similar to an activity my grandpa would tease and say that it is like hitting yourself in the head with a hammer until it feels good when you stop.

Motion passes 3-0.

Meeting adjourned 9:30 a.m.


Shane Colton, Chairman
Martha Williams, Director

